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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000024

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2027

TAGS: [PREL](#) [BA](#) [REGION](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: SENIOR MFA OFFICIAL DISCUSSES SECTARIAN ISSUES,  
IRAN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

11. (C) Summary. MFA Assistant U/S Shaikh Abdel Aziz, in a frank discussion January 8 with CNO Executive Panel Co-Chairs Zakheim and Skinner, said that concerns about rising Shia empowerment in the region were a growing concern, and different from the past when the Shia threat had been troubling but not threatening. Bahrain has been trying to deal with the Shia issue domestically through economic development and more representation in government. He acknowledged that Bahrain walked a fine line in developing democracy, and that a democratic path that resulted in regime change is a "red line." He expressed optimism that Bahrain could successfully manage its domestic situation, but added that events in Iraq and Iran were affecting people's thinking in Bahrain. The execution of Saddam had not gone down well in Bahrain, and reports that witnesses were using Persian religious expressions played into local conspiracy theories about the execution. He did not think that Iran was directly interfering in Bahrain, although some in the government viewed that differently. He described Iranians as a frustrated people who feel they are not getting the respect they deserve. End summary.

12. (C) CNO Executive Panel Co-Chairpersons Dov Zakheim and Kiron Skinner met January 8 with Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assistant Undersecretary Shaikh Abdel Aziz bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa for a discussion on regional issues that focused on the rise of sectarianism and Iran. Dr. Zakheim opened the conversation by asking Shaikh Abdel Aziz for his views on claims of a developing Shia "crescent" across the region. Shaikh Abdel Aziz said that this is indeed a concern. In the past, the Shia threat had been troubling but never threatening. But now it is different. "This time we feel that they have been empowered, not only in Bahrain but also in Lebanon and Iraq. You feel it. You feel that Shia today believe that this is their day of glory. There is no doubt that they feel they are rallying."

13. (C) The biggest danger, he continued, is from those Shia with nothing to lose. The rise of Shia empowerment provides a special lift to those unhappy, low-income Shia in the region. Bahrain is trying to handle this not only through economic development but also by encouraging more balanced representation in the government. Bahrain has prominent Shia in the government (including a Deputy Prime Minister and two Ministers), and in the parliament. But there is worry that in the future hard-line Shia might have higher goals and ambitions. Controlling the hard-line Shia, as well as the hard-line Sunni on the other side, will be a big challenge for Bahrain.

14. (C) Dr. Zakheim noted that, given the country's demographic make-up with a Shia majority population, developing democracy in Bahrain is a complex proposition. He

asked how Shaikh Abdel Aziz saw the country "getting from here to there without tripping." Shaikh Abdel Aziz said that the government had to walk a fine line in developing democracy, a task made more difficult by the country's limited resources. There is a red line, he stated. A democratic path that resulted in regime change is a red line. As long as the government keeps its side of the bargain, you won't see anyone approaching the red line. "We think we can manage the situation here," he said, "although regional developments are a concern." He noted that events in Iraq and Iran are affecting people's thinking in Bahrain. "The execution of Saddam Hussein did not go down well here. The chanters on the tape of the execution were saying Islamic prayers in the Persian way, very Iranian. That was scary to us here. It played into the conspiracy theories that are emerging." (Comment: we have heard from several sources here the claim that people at the execution were speaking with an Iranian accent, and this has indeed played into local conspiracy theories that somehow the U.S. and Iran were in cahoots over the execution. End comment.)

15. (C) Dr. Zakheim asked to what extent Shaikh Abdel Aziz saw Iranian involvement in Bahraini domestic affairs. Shaikh Abdel Aziz replied that the Iranian government would certainly favor a rise in Shia power in Bahrain, but he was not so sure the government was directly interfering. That said, elements outside the Iranian government, such as religious clerics, were no doubt active. But he would be cautious about thinking there was an actual threat being "cooked up" by the Iranian government in Bahrain. He added that some in the Bahrain government see it differently.

16. (C) Asked about Iranian behavior in the region more generally, Shaikh Abdel Aziz said that the Iranians are a

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frustrated people who feel they are not getting the respect they deserve. If Iran behaves in a reasonable way, he added, Bahrain won't recognize it as the superpower in the region, but it will give Iran respect. As for how the West should treat Iran, he urged that we do everything by the book, through the UN. Any kind of military action would be disastrous. "It would set off something we don't want to see."

17. (C) Asked if he worried about a nuclear Iran, Shaikh Abdel Aziz said he worried about it as an environmental issue. The Busheir reactor is closer to Bahrain than to Tehran. Any kind of leak or nuclear disaster could ruin the desalinated water Bahrainis drink and kill the fish they eat. But in terms of a nuclear weapon threat to Bahrain or the countries of the region, he said he did not view this as a major threat. (Comment: others in the Bahraini Government are not so sanguine.)

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